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*Multi-Dimensional Dementia:*M.D. Coverley's *Califia* and The Aesthetics of Forgetting

Ever since Mnemosyne, the mother of the muses, gave the wax tablet to mortals, memory, writing and technology have been interconnected. As a mnemonic technology, hypertext was first envisioned by Vannevar Bush and Ted Nelson in its prehistory as an associational, archival storage system suitable for classifying and sorting vast quantities of information. But where library databases, technical manuals and other knowledge-based hypertexts still fulfill this function, literary hypertext overturns this proposed usage, incorporating information overload and forgetfulness as a part of the reading process. Promoting dissociation and an awareness of the spatio-temporal dimensions of its environment, hypertext fiction uses the aesthetics of its three-dimensional interface and structure to frustrate memory and to play with sensory and emotional responses. In M.D. Coverley's multimedia novel *Califia*, the aesthetics of the hypertext form become an engine of forgetfulness that drives her text through its explorations of lost memories, including the ravages of Alzheimer's Disease, unofficial histories, missing pieces, encrypted maps and the quest for buried treasure. Forgetting is a part of living in the text, and short term memory is constantly being bombarded by cues, clues and flashbacks in 800 screens of text and images¹.

¹ I should note that this will be a case study of how memory—or its absence—functions in one text, *Califia*. However, memory and forgetting are cognitive states that are frequently evoked in literary hypertexts, like in Tim McLaughlin's *Notes Toward Absolute Zero*, or Judy Malloy's *Its Name was Penelope* (to mention two of the better known ones). Michael Joyce's *Twilight*, for example, uses memory as a refuge and a source of nostalgia for simpler times. In *Twilight*, the air of the overload of present time leans heavily, closing in with all the weight of sky. Memory for Joyce's characters is something exhaustible: it is possible to run "out of memory" ("out of memory") and death's threshold is never far away, "to save is to forget," the sailor says, "therefore I must press to keep these words alive"

Califia is a genealogical "treasure map" that reconnects a forgotten web of stories and legends of three prospecting California families over five generations. A complex user interface divides the text into four journeyings, each of which is a doorway into the narrative: they are South (The Comets in the Yard), East (Wind, Sand and Stars), North (The Night of the Bear) and West (The Journey Out). The present tense chronicles of Augusta Summerland, Kaye Beveridge and Calvin Lugo show their "speculative reconstructions" ("To the Reader—South") of their families' search for the hidden stash of Califia gold. On her home page in the text, Kaye explains: "This effort to put all of the information together will reveal that no part of the story is an isolated incident, all is a part of the whole... we will unearth forgotten relationships, restore the connections, find the harmony beneath the fragments of song." Even though *Califia* can be read in a linear progression through the four sections, the storylines within each section are anything but linear. Navigated by StarMaps, this is a *nomadic* quest to trace the fluid connections between fortune, bloodlines, women and the past and the future. "Nomadic consciousness," argues Rosi Braidotti,

is akin to what Foucault called counter-memory [the transformation of history into a different kind of time]; it is a form of resisting assimilation... The nomadic tense is the imperfect: it is active, continuous; the nomadic trajectory is controlled speed. The nomadic style is about transitions and passages without predetermined destinations or lost homelands. The nomad's relationship to the earth is one of transitory attachment and cyclical frequentation... (25).

("What the sailor says"). There is a melancholia and a hopelessness that comes with *Twilight's* frozen window on the past and lowering ceilings of sky in the present. Forgetting is an event in and of itself in Joyce's text, whereas for *Califia* there is no such permanence to forgetfulness.

Califia is just such a feminist anti-history of navigation where the nomadic reader steers by dead reckoning. Following the seven stars of the big dipper, the reader exits via the solar table into sacred spaces and new lands. An assemblage of narrative, images, documents and prophecies, the text is open-ended and invites the reader to lose herself in a rambling web of the sometimes contradictory pieces comprising the journeys. Augusta's narrative relates the present day chronology of the grail-like quest to solve the riddles that lead to the legendary treasure, but it also tells the story of her mother's decline into the "convoluted labyrinth" of Alzheimer's Disease.



Violet Summerland, Augusta's mother, is one of the last surviving characters who possesses information about the gold's location. The disease, however, affects her speech as it does her mind, and her meanings have become "crippled." In such a state, Violet functions as a liminal

figure occupying a place at 'Paradise Home' on the threshold between the present and the past, between madness and sanity and between language and symbol. Her affliction functions as what Janet Murray calls a "mythopoetic state...between the world of ordinary experience and the world of the sacred" (292). The aesthetics of forgetting are found ideally in the freedom from past cares: a kind of liberation from history or a rebirth into living in an embodied state in the present moment. Memorylessness could mark a return to innocence, to a preverbal state, or to the immersive environment of an eternal present. But Violet is outside of time with her difficulties in communicating in the here and now. She speaks only an encoded, associational, private language, and occupies a deeply isolated immersive state. Advanced sufferers of Alzheimer's Disease have no short term memory and no ability to let new memories form (Ross 21). At the same time, as a sufferer of the disease, Violet does retain long-term memories of past events. Occupying the present moment fosters embodiment and an awareness of the body's situation in space; it is therefore significant for Violet that speaking her past memories in the present is possible only as a physical act. Augusta observes:

Holding her hands like that [in order to write], I feel the fingers pulsing, one by one. Maybe she is trying to remember the letters of her name, I think—and then I realize that she is repeating some names over and over, softly, one name for each finger... (Paradise Meeting 3).

Violet counts out on her fingers the eight names of the dipper stars that are clues to solving the riddle of the locations of the legendary gold mines marked on the map. Where the spatiality of the present tense is largely inaccessible to Violet who has little awareness of her surroundings, for her and for us long term memory and reading are proprioceptive experiences (Joyce 229). We recall our voyagings in life or in narrative in the multi-dimensional space-time² of our bodies. Michael Joyce calls memory "the act of traversing space" (160), and it is Violet who voyages intra-dimensionally through landscapes of time and place. She is continually asking for her dead husband Jack, and she recognizes the narrator Calvin immediately, although she has not seen him in years. Only as readers can we travel with her along her flights of mind and associative connections, for memory is an immersive space that we can fully inhabit only in madness, dreams, art or religious ritual. Joyce has said that "Meaning exists in the space of its unfolding" (102) and Violet's mind flowers outward into past lived lives, away from the present where she is cerebrally deaf to signals, and unfurls into the many narratives Violet will never speak. Only her urgent hand gestures in the present tell of her knowledge and awareness of the past.

Alzheimer's might be seen as a cognitive model for the act of reading *Califia*. Voyaging through time and space where the overloaded short term memory is at tension with the demands of reading the text, *Califia's* wealth challenges us beyond our powers of absorption, testing our memory through sheer excess information. The Solar Table designates the text: "A circle dance that has links and wheels within wheels. Each Journey triverges into three routes with "22 'true' ways and 32 'paths of wisdom.'" Calvin dubs *Califia's* deep structure a "Wheel Dance" where "Each of the three narrative paths gives you sets of choices in crazy eights" with eight circling wheels in total (Cabala Wheels: Calvin's Dance 4). These sudden changes in narrative direction create a kind of dementia as we are derailed in our reading and thrown back and forth in time. When we traverse space by activating a link, no tangible (or textual) memory of the travel remains, and the 'back' button takes us backward in the structural organization of the text, not in the narrative. The reader must ramble and be sidetracked in *Califia* because all narrative lines are short and end in mid-air—and yet all are interlinked across time and geography by the constant of the quest for treasure.

² Space-time is the collective term for the first four dimensions of the physical world, the dimensions that are perceptible to the senses.

As Kaye says, “It’s all the same thing. Past dreams, future dreams, present dreams” (Augusta’s Path).

The text keeps returning to memories of Violet, even after her death, because she can lead us to the next world if only we can unravel her associations and follow her phantom footprints in sand. Seers, sirens and sibyls were prophets who, with one foot in both worlds, enacted a temporal flux through the power of revisioning the future. Violet is a guide who stands on the threshold of the text between past and present, informing Augusta’s understanding of the mythic nature of the family obsession and teaching her how to follow in the footsteps of Violet’s own associations. Just as the voice of sibylline prophecy disintegrates into nonsense once it is recorded, so Violet’s hypertextual voice is trans-formed into “a mosaic of shattered syllables” when she speaks. In *Califia*, we also encounter the Spirit Woman of the Milky Way who rises on the third night after her death and, like the text, visits all of the significant places in her life. She then wanders east, west and south, returning each time to her starting point. As she heads north, she begs her husband not to follow as she mounts the bridge of the dead to the Milky Way. Like Violet, all she leaves behind are “the shadow of her heels” visible in daylight. In the same way as readers, we undertake the journeys through the old memories of three compass points, and return to our starting point at the end of each voyage. When we make the last turn, some final pieces of the mysteries of the constellations of star lore and family history are revealed to us. Dancing through time and a literal family archives, narrative roots in space and place are the mythic elements that hold *Califia* together in the fractured California landscape—for, this is a text of the soil, veined with maps, and topographic details as much as with ongoing rumours of buried gold.

Califia’s structure is organized on a mosaic model with its shattered syllables being grouped into two archival collections: Kaye’s myths, legends and prophesies and Calvin’s documentary-driven re-creation of past events. Combined with Augusta’s chronological narrative of the present, the three perspectives write a history that tells lost stories and unofficial knowledges. This alternate history is a feminist genealogy or countermemory told through a discordant union of discourses in eight “books”: text-based biographical ‘snapshots,’ letters, government reports, deeds, conversations, journal entries and reconstructed narratives are complemented and rediscovered through photos of people and places, fault lines, a scrap of blue blanket, music, four journey maps and a spinning night sky with its network of guiding stars.

An archive is born of forgetfulness (Derrida 11), for it is in the drive to remember that collections are made for posterity. *Califia*’s archival system, however, is not interested so much in posterity as in immediacy. It is both temporal and spatial and embraces contradictions, privileging emotional and sensory information as the most important ‘knowledge’ to be stored. The key piece of intelligence in the text is the experience of transcendence that comes with the acquisition of the treasure of emotional connection, as when Violet’s footprints appear in the sand or when Calvin learns who his parents were. Hypertext’s associational logic makes it a mnemonic form, but, as an inclusive archival space, it also allows just such a proliferation of contradictions as the alignment of emotion and sensation with ‘knowledge.’ Being rooted in short term memory as it is, hypertext is by extension also rooted in memory loss. Without a hierarchy to govern the many plots, a reader must decide what is important in the text and, working with an associational structure, many details are bound to be forgotten. However, in *Califia* the sensory information is encoded—not in the text as such—but in the archival *structure*. Dispersing information into the three-dimensional plot architecture with its family trees, StarMaps, Kit Bag and 800 screens, the text plays with memory loss as an asset (not a bug) by using a reader’s limited short term memory against herself, and making the recall of the overwhelming mass of specifics difficult. A tri-part narrative structure foregrounds the immersive, sensual experience of connection through reading in the moment and part of the joy in the text is experienced through the physical fact of navigation. Plot still exists, but because it is abstract and spatial—being the very structure and interface of the work as animated by the nomadic act of reading—it is difficult to recreate in the mind except as an emotional and sensory response.

Forgetfulness, one aspect of information overload, is enacted by the lack of hierarchy in the hypertext form itself³. Creating a sense of loss and of being lost, a reader jumps through *Califia*’s many layers of text, image, and sound, anticipating the future and being surprised by returns to past spaces, like Paradise Home or Nellie’s Deeds—made new and significant in revisits. The text privileges forgetting and the rediscovery of what has been forgotten through the use of Alzheimer’s Disease

³ Davida Charney argues that it is hierarchies, headings and chronologies that help us remember; we only remember things spatially when objects remain fixed. An alternating organization like hypertext, where readers switch their attention back and forth between items, is the most difficult to remember of all, and hypertext readers have been shown to easily lose track of their place in a network (Charney 242, 247, 249).

as a structural and aesthetic trope for the restlessness, nomadism and the obsessive moving and re-moving of stashes of gold. This kind of dementia encourages the reader to assemble the visual and textual clues of the text into coherent stories in her own memory; the only hierarchy established emanates from the reader's valuing of particulars in her stash of clues. In the process of navigating the spaces of the "cosmic pattern" (Kaye's message) of the history of the families no 'progress' is discernable. The disorientation of navigating an unfamiliar nomadic world requires a reader, just like Violet, to rely on senses and emotions, rather than on logic. This is associational memory rather than simple recall. It is the reader who forges the many connections lying dormant in the text, and the reader who must reconcile the contradictions in her own version of the story.

Califia is an experience that requires the building of associational worlds in the memory as an active assembling of the reading process. A lack of logical structuring also encourages the reader to *look* at the text (and to listen to its music.) Aesthetics thereby become part of the reading process. "Beauty is a resistant structure" (Kirschenbaum n.p.) and this means that the reader cannot reduce, analyze or categorize the images. They must be experienced on an emotional level. And like Alzheimer's Disease, aesthetics are a private, personal system—an indecipherable, associational code. The sensory experience of the images and texts-as-images (for the line blurs in a narrative like this) also become part of the voyagings of the plot because the clues are never hierarchical or purely textual. Navigation of the narrative environment ensures physical grounding in the present moment and activates the proprioceptive sense, but the *reading* of text and image sets a reader adrift in the spatio-temporal dimension.

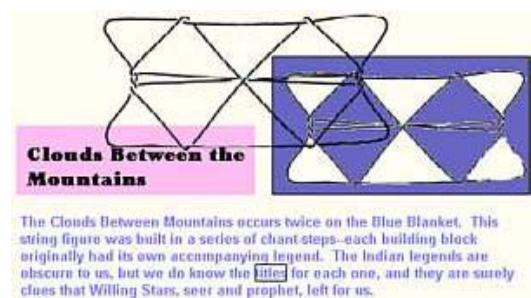
The dementia inherent in variable space and time is embodied in conflicting memories of the same events and in oral forms of storytelling. Rosalind Summerland, for example, recounts two versions of the shooting of Augusta's father: "One version," she says, "is what I believed at the time and continued to consider the official family account. Another has all the later revelations, the elements that fill in the spaces, answering questions we did not want to ask" (North: Point 4). All of the family legends evidence the same split: they are "the wishful thinking of a bunch of eccentrics. The treasures might be priceless or worthless depending on your faith in the long shot" (South: Augusta 3). It is significant that *Califia* is not a history, but instead a genealogy—for a genealogy embraces the personal (Foucault 156). This hypertext privileges the familial and the unofficial, and subjective narratives are

contrasted by the presence of official histories and 'objective' perspectives like maps, legal documents and uncensored accounts of the greed and racism that led to the oppression and eventual extinction of the native people known as the Chumash.

Just as Augusta's great great grandfather Samuel Walker is the father of the quest for the elusive cache of gold, his Chumash wife, Willing Stars, is the mother of tribal secrets and the unofficial discourse of ancient ways of knowing. Twice rechristened by whites in attempts to erase her identity⁴, she is saviour and medicine woman to her people. As the last audible voice of her line and a liminal figure between worlds, she is the keeper of forgotten knowledge:

Willing Stars apprenticed as a healer, learning the directions of the land, the proper shape of tattoos, the curative herbs and roots, the skill of divining stones, the old stories, how to tie the dead for burial, and the string figures that told the pattern of the stars (Stars Fell From the Heavens).

Utilizing her 'incomprehensible' discourse and countercultural knowledge as a form of encryption, Willing Stars as mapmaker is the author of the symbolic language that guards the family secrets. Where official records document only the sale of a blue blanket to an Indian woman for \$3.00 (Tejon Letters 1), the family legacy is preserved in the pieces of the delicately embroidered blanket itself. The stitching tells the location of the gold for those who know how to read the old ways. The language of Willing Stars' map has its origins in native astronomy and the myths of the Southwest. Not recognizable as any kind of science, the art of reading the stars—particularly as a tool for navigation—was taught to children in the form of string games including the still popular Cat's Cradle.



⁴ She is renamed once as Luisa Dolores Digger—with Digger being a racial slur—when she is sold as a bonded servant and again as Willing Stars when the "mouths of strangers shortened her name" from 'Spirit One Who Weaves the Skirt of the Web of Willing Stars' (Stars Fell From the Heavens).

Each pattern has an accompanying chant that tells a story. Literacy in this art has been forgotten: "The stars do not correspond with the fingers," Kaye says, "and we have lost the reading of the constellations in the loops of web. For now." (Kaye's Path: Cat's Cradle). It is the Whirling Man or dipper pattern—a cluster of eight stars encompassing the seven stars of the Big Dipper—that guards the treasure's location in Willing Stars' handiwork. Her symbolic language is a perfect blending of image and text, where that which is outside language speaks aesthetic meaning, and where her code is not crackable without prior knowledge of her people's stories.

Like Violet's incomprehensible song, Willing Star's embroidered hieroglyphics are the last echoes of words spoken in the private language of an extinct people. Both of their voices fall on near deaf ears and it is only with Augusta, Kaye and Calvin's unraveling of secrets that Violet and Willing Stars' meanings and messages emerge from the apparent trappings of non-sense. Just as Augusta had not noticed the embroidery on the blue blanket, so she initially misreads Violet's attempt to communicate: "To think I had taken this as mumbling, when she was so concentrated on telling me the names [of the dipper stars]. At such an effort. Clicking them off on her fingers, so as not to forget to remember to remember" (North: Night of the Bear, Introduction).

Privileging a women's community and oral forms of storytelling, *Califia* undertakes a rediscovery of what has been forgotten in the present and reclaims the beauty in non-conceptual ways of knowing. Positing an ongoing grail quest for meaning and direction, the text re-creates a world where an elusive treasure of the constellations of connections are the ideal, but where linguistic ruptures, quakes and fissures are necessary for growth and changing perceptions. Just as the California landscape is constantly rewritten by earthquakes and landslides, and functions as a literal and figurative container of forgotten memories in *Califia*, so "Our memories" like the text "are always in the process of revision" (North: Night of the Bear, Introduction).

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A literary advisor to the *Electronic Literature Organization*, **Carolyn Guertin** is a scholar of the new media arts and the feminist avant-garde at the University of Alberta, Canada. Curator of *Assemblage: The Women's New Media Gallery* in the U.K., her own creative and critical works have been published internationally in print and online.

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M.D. Coverley's *Califia* is available through Eastgate at www.eastgate.com or by mail order:

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8.24.01

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Patrick F. Durgin

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